

THE BALANCING ACT: RESEARCHER ROLES IN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECTS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore research methods and practices that foreground the authentic needs, experiences, and contributions of adult learners. We will discuss balancing our roles as researchers with those of community members seeking to connect with their family and / or local histories. Two research projects will be highlighted as case examples of these issues. We will address the interwoven learning themes around personal issues of nonformal learning, identity, transformation, as well as social issues of co-learning, structure, and balance of power.

Introduction

Education does not end once learners step out of the towers of formal institutions of learning; in fact most adults never step into such institutions. Lindeman once said, "The whole of life is learning, therefore education can have no endings (1926, p. 6). Beyond the much examined formal settings, adults pursue vital personal education in self-directed and nonformal ways. The gap between research and practice in higher education, and the need to move beyond the gap is a concern of ours and of many others (Kezar & Eckel 2000). We are both currently working in a higher education setting with adults, but our research projects engage adults at a grassroots level, specifically through community performance theater and life history approaches. We have gone out into the community as researchers, searching for new ways to connect theory and practice. Burris states, "Reconstructing their life history provided these [adult learners] with a realization of how much learning had taken place over a lifetime outside of an academic setting and how they achieved fundamental changes in certain meaning perspectives" (1998, p. 1). We believe it is important to the field of adult education that learning opportunities become more accessible to adults at the grassroots level where research is conducted.

Background and Context

Searching for new ways to provide access to democratic learning for adults, we are both committed to research that derives meaning from the oral histories of the learners. We are interested in creating authentic opportunities for adult learning. We are defining authentic as genuinely and respectfully connected to the collective realities of those in the learning space. Through the research questions, "Who am I?" "Who am I in the context of my ancestry?" "Who are we as a community?" etc. we offer a mirror for adults to reflect on themselves and their world.

"Who are we as a community?" is a central question for Scrap Mettle SOUL, an urban community performance theater ensemble, founded in 1994 by Richard Owen Geer. Bette was a performer in and participant observer of their most recent production, *The Whole World Gets Well*. Each year the ensemble creates an original, musical play, professionally adapted from oral histories gathered from folks in the Uptown / Edgewater area of Chicago. The mostly amateur cast includes folks of various ages, races, and socio-economic circumstances, reflecting the rich diversity of the community. They rehearse and perform in a local community center, gathering a crowd of neighbors as the audience. Participating in this form of theater that is "of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Geer, 1993) has enabled Bette to experience the community performance process. As a result of experiencing the shared passion and collective creativity of this process, Bette envisions it as a unique form of community education with much to offer to the field. Her goal is to promote community performance as a process that stimulates personal and social learning.

"Who am I in the context of my ancestry?" is a central question in a phenomenological research project, focusing on adults who utilize nonformal and self-directed means to discover and re-discover their family narratives and history. In her role as heuristic, phenomenological inquirer, Beth is exploring adult learners' essential experiences, meanings made, and identity around family history research. She is engaging participants in in-depth interviews, and is asking them to share artifacts as well as products of their research (family narratives, journals, family trees, etc.). The focus of the project is on learners who go beyond their immediate lives and beyond the simple production of a pedigree chart to the goal of delving into the lessons found in the ancestral past. Beth is not only interested in the skeletal sketch of family trees but in how learners get at the flesh and bones and the heart and soul of the knowledge gained. The goal of this research is to understand, celebrate, and support such efforts.

Discussion

We want to guard against what Merriam refers to as a "monopoly of knowledge" (1998, p. 126). Studies need not be for consumption and benefit of the academic community alone. In his presidential address to the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Terenzini challenged, "Engaging in more practice- and policy-oriented research is, I believe, both a professional responsibility and a self-interested necessity. In the current financial climate, accountability driven as it is, we cannot expect to continue public supported research that does not serve the public needs" (1996, p.8).

Adults become involved with community groups and efforts for a variety of personal reasons with a major one being for support of their personal learning goals. In our experience people become involved in self-directed and social learning projects because they feel free to pursue their own interests. Nonformal educational opportunities in the community can be natural, approachable, and helpful to adults. Reed defines nonformal education as "...any organized, intentional, and explicit effort to promote learning to enhance the quality of life through out-of-school approaches" (1984, p. 52). Reed also lists characteristics of nonformal education such as learner centered, non-hierarchical relationship of facilitator and learner, community-oriented content, and use of local resources.

Galbraith explains that adult learners are likely to choose nonformal activities due to their own motivations, and these activities are most successful when they retain control over their learning needs (1990). As researchers and educators we need to support learners in these efforts without imposing and putting the too formal into a nonformal effort.

Heimlich points out that in a nonformal educational exchange, the "seminar may...have very formal objectives that are different from those of the learner (1993, p. 2)." We think it is important to seek ways of ensuring that the exchange is beneficial to all. In a nonformal effort learners and educators/researchers bring needs and expectations to the exchange. Appropriately, effectively, and ethically balancing learners' needs with that of researchers is our concern. How can we align educational or research objectives with the desires of a diverse community of learners? Heimlich states, "The success of a nonformal...program resides with the true responsiveness of the program to the needs and wants of the learners, not the perceived wants and needs of learners by the institution or by the individual educator" (p.5).

Adults pursue vital learning through biographical approaches. Researchers have also come to value more "creative" approaches such as the use of narratives (Clark, 2001). Life history and biographical methods are fairly well accepted (especially in Europe as evidenced by organizations such as the International Association for Life History Applied to Adult Education [ASIHVIF]). Pierre Dominice, President of ASIHVIF states, "As adults investigate the global scene of their life history the meaning of their lives is transformed... The biographical approach allows adults a new way of reflecting about themselves and the world in which they live" (2000, p. 26). We are interested in how adults are affected by such learning (around identity, meaning making, and transformation), as well as how the knowledge is shared in communities (i.e. with family or

other adult learners undergoing similar pursuits). Individuals who unearth family stories have a variety of role models and narratives to draw upon. Sarbin (1986) calls these “libraries of plots”. These stories stimulate meaning making and identity formation. Ultimately personal growth, transformation, and social change are possible.

Participating in a project that highlights the history of family or of a community can be transformational. Mezirow strongly states, “No need is more fundamentally human than our need to understand the meaning of our experience. Free, full participation in critical and reflective discourse may be interpreted as a basic human right” (1990, p. 11). We are drawn to Brook’s definition, “Transformational learning, simply put, is learning that leads to some type of fundamental change in the learners’ sense of themselves, their worldview, their understanding of their pasts and their orientation to the future” (2000, p. 140).

Examining one’s own life history can impact personal growth and transformation. A participant in Beth’s project discovered a pattern of family members on both the maternal and the paternal sides of being in teaching and or healing roles and occupations. These discoveries confirmed her identity and life’s work as a spiritual teacher. Another informant reported having her identity clarified and confirmed through her process of researching and writing up her family history. After reflecting on her efforts, she proudly referred to herself as an “author”. Consequently she is planning to write in other venues and publish. Still other individuals mentioned practical applications of their learning: making better lifestyle and health (psychological and physical) choices as a result of their discovering family medical, predispositional, and genetic history.

One respondent shared that the process of reconnecting with her family history, traditions, and non-Western ways of knowing truly saved her life. Prior to this learning journey she was suicidal. She was searching for meaning. She decided to give life one more chance to see if it was worth living. Once she began reconnecting she never looked back. She now helps others find meaning and their places in life.

As researchers we view individuals in social contexts. The balancing of power, access, and structure are evident to us from our work with participants and from the literature. David Null raises the issue of library collections not being readily made available to lay persons for support of their family research projects (1985). The socioeconomic and complex issue of access to technology came up as well. Most participants extol the virtues of internet sources in aiding them in their independent research efforts (i.e. Census records on line, Ellis Island’s web site, Church of the Latter-Day Saints sites). We believe that there is a “digital divide” in this country. Beth sees the digital divide as the inequitable gap between the “haves” who do have personal computers/sophisticated equipment and the skills to use them while the “have-nots” do not have the same access or opportunities. Some family history researchers will have to rely more heavily on “professionals” or may simply not use the technology to gain the knowledge that others may take for granted.

Quinn, archivist at Northwestern University, holds that individuals engaged in nonformal efforts may not be considered by archivists or academics as serious or scholarly, and as a result their learning is not fully supported. He states, “This sort of research deserves to be taken seriously as a form of learning. The surge of interest reflects a democratic and populist strand in society that has important implications for our culture” (1991, p. B2).

Participants in the community performance ensemble report that open access to the project is affirming. Scrap Mettle SOUL creates co-learning opportunities in an open, inclusive culture of participation. All community members who volunteer are welcomed to join the ensemble. Ensemble means that individual performances are less emphasized than the collective performance of the whole. In an atmosphere that promotes safety and support, the ensemble creates not only community history, but also community knowledge. Curry & Cunningham (2000) describe co-learning as a social learning process. They argue that, “Co-learning is one way to equalize power relationships and to deny socially constructed privileging of one knowledge

over the other" (Curry & Cunningham, 2000, pg. 75). A part of this process is making meaning through cultural symbols. One example of co-learning through cultural symbols is the true story from the community around a scarecrow they named Shim (she/him) that was highlighted in the most recent production. One person in the community set Shim out in the park dressed for fall, and with each passing season community members changed Shim's costume, reflecting the diversity of the neighborhood. This brought neighbors together who may not have normally spoken to each other. Shim became a shared symbol and part of the community's history.

Conclusion

Overall, we challenge practitioners and researchers to stretch beyond the security of formal structure to allow learners to significantly enter and own learning objectives and processes. We hold that through these approaches learners will come to know themselves and those in their communities in meaningful ways. Brady states, "Is this not our destiny as human beings: to learn, to grow, to come to know ourselves and the meanings of our life in the deepest, richest, most textured way possible? If we do not know the self, what can we know? If we cannot learn from reflection upon our own lived experiences, from what can we learn?" (1990, p. 51). We hope this examination of biographical methods and learners' use of narrative and history has opened up some lines of communication. We believe these issues warrant continued conversation and exploration.

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